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ABSTRACT

The short unit, designed around the use of the film "Misunderstanding China", is a secondary level study of American stereotypes of China. The major objective of the unit is to help students understand the origins and causes of stereotypes. While the case in point is China, the unit can be used in any context where stereotyping is relevant. Suggested teaching strategies include questioning techniques and classroom discussion. The unit is composed of the following three sections: (1) preliminary exercise and discussion on the definition, origins, causes, and people's attitudes towards stereotypes; (2) showing the film "Misunderstanding China" which is an historical presentation of how Americans have viewed China; and (3) follow-up discussion to fill out and expand the previous discussion on stereotypes with some of the historical material presented in the film. Ideas and suggestions for discussion topics are presented. An annotated bibliography of recommended secondary classroom materials on China, comprising half of the document, is included. (Author/RM)

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"MISUNDERSTANDING CHINA" UNIT

PREPARED BY

BAY AREA CHINA EDUCATION PROJECT*
(BAYCEP)

INTRODUCTION

This short unit is designed around the use of the film, "Misunderstanding China," in a study of American stereotypes of China. While the case in point is China, the unit can be used in any context where stereotyping is relevant. For example, discussion can profitably include stereotypes of other racial minorities in the United States besides the Chinese. Still, the film is an excellent introduction to a unit on China.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FILM

"An excellent historical presentation of how Americans have viewed China, relying upon clips from old films, illustrations from comic books and texts, and other sources that generally presented China to Americans as quaint, ruthless, elegant, impoverished, and of course, inscrutable. The film uses considerable newsreel footage taken during China's war with Japan and builds to a very candid and often harsh description of the weakness and collapse of the Nationalist armies and the success of Mao's revolution. This eclectic documentary was designed specifically to make us reassess our view of China. Intelligently prepared as a network TV special as background for President Nixon's visit to China in February 1972."

Source: China: A Resource and Curriculum Guide edited by Arlene Posner and Arne J. de Keijzer (University of Chicago Press, 1973)

The unit is composed of 3 basic sections which we'll now describe.

PRELIMINARY EXERCISE AND DISCUSSION (15 to 20 minutes on the day of, or prior to, the showing of the film within a single class.)

1. The teacher (or a student) asks the class to divide a piece of paper into 2 sections. He or she then asks the class to list the first three things which come to mind upon hearing the word "China" in one section of the paper. In the other section the process is repeated with the word "America." The papers are collected, and after the discussion described below, the teacher (or students) should tabulate the results, noting the frequency with which terms or ideas appear in each section. This list will be combined with those of other classes watching the movie "Misunderstanding China" and announced to the students watching the film.
2. After this exercise, the teacher can open the discussion by asking students what images they see of Asians and other minorities in the mass media.

*A Project of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, Inc.

Examples like Kung Fu, Hawaii 5-0, certain 7-Up commercials, and the Command Hair Spray Ping-Pong commercial may be interesting to cite. The teacher can ask students about other sources of exposure to Asians and Asian life, and how such exposure fits in with images seen or heard through the media. Examples such as Chinatown, a Chinese restaurant, Chinese books, certain greeting cards using Chinese people and language in a "comical" way ("rots of ruv on your birthday") are useful.

3. The class can then shift to a more general discussion of the definition and origins of stereotypes. The teacher might ask whether students think stereotypes are always negative and whether stereotypes are always linked to racism. Finally, the class should try to draw up a preliminary list of the causes of stereotypes to which they can refer after seeing the film.
4. Because of the nature of the film, we feel that this preliminary discussion is very necessary. The film contains excerpts from old movies and comic books which, we have learned through experience, can tend to create stereotypes in students where none existed if the students are not prepared to look at the film's contents in a critical way. Our hope, and the objective of the film, is that students will come away concerned about the effect of a "Fu Manchu" on people's attitudes, not feeling how "neat" "Chinese torture" is.

SHOWING "MISUNDERSTANDING CHINA"

1. The film is 52 minutes in length, one 32-minute reel and one 20-minute reel. The two reels can be shown at one or two sittings depending on time limits.
2. After the film we suggest that a teacher who has computed and combined the results of the stereotype exercises for all the classes announce the results to the students and ask for reactions. The results and comments can serve as a transition to the follow-up discussion during the next class.
3. An effective "launching pad" for discussion based on the film can be found in the very last part of the film itself. As a background to the film credits, the producer has used a scene from "55 Days at Peking" which shows Charlton Heston as an American cavalry officer riding out of Peking with his troops after the Boxer Rebellion. At one point along the road, he spots amidst the onlooking crowd a little Chinese girl whom he had earlier befriended after her parents were killed. The little girl is obviously afraid that her American friend is going to abandon her. But, Heston reins in his horse and stops near where the girl is standing. The camera, after focusing on the look of fear and despair in the child's eyes, swings to Heston, who, in grand, heroic manner, reaches down to the little girl and says, "Here, take my hand...". The final shot shows the child's expression changing to absolute rapture as she is lifted up into the saddle with Heston.

Try stopping the projector after this scene has been shown once; rewind the reel and run it through again after telling the students to pay close attention to this last part (many may have tuned out after the narration ends and missed this scene altogether). By asking the students what the

producer meant by using that particular sequence as a background for the credits, you can get a good indication as to whether they really understood the message of the film. The Heston scene is a beautiful symbolic statement of the historical American attitude towards China and can be used to begin a class discussion of that topic.

FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION (WITHIN A SINGLE CLASS)

1. The objective of the follow-up is to fill out and expand the previous discussion on stereotypes with some of the historical material presented in the film. Some possible questions are:
 - What effects do wars have on racial stereotypes? (The accompanying xerox from a 1941 issue of TIME is a very useful aid here, perhaps as the basis of an inquiry discussion.)
 - How did the socio-economic status of the Chinese and the particular stage of U.S. economic development in the mid- and late 19th century affect white American stereotypes of Chinese? What are the common historical factors affecting stereotypes in the Chinese, Black, Native American, and Chicano experiences?
 - What have been the changes in American stereotypes of China over the past 50-100 years?
 - How has President Nixon's trip to China affected American stereotypes of Chinese?
2. The class should finally go back to the earlier composed list of causes of stereotypes and add or change it to see how the movie and discussion affected students' thinking.

NOTE

The above 3-period schedule is flexible with respect to individual class needs. If the movie cannot be shown during one period, it can be divided into two class hours and supplemented with additional material.

OTHER REFERENCES

1. "How to Tell Your Friends From the Japs" from Time Magazine, December 22, 1941, purporting to describe Japanese as opposed to Chinese. This has proven valuable in classes in U. S. Government and history as well as Asian studies.
2. Three Generations of Chinese-East and West by Shirley Sun (the Oakland Museum, 1973) is a very helpful text that presents salient aspects of the Chinese experience in America (and especially the Bay Area) in a very readable way. Included in this booklet is a description of the development of what used to be a sizable Chinatown in San Jose, as well as poems written on walls by Chinese detained on Angel Island. The booklet is available through Everybody's Bookstore, 840 Kearny, San Francisco 94108 (781-4989) for \$3.50.

3. "That Oriental Feeling" by Irvin Paik in Roots: An Asian American Reader edited by Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, and Franklin Odo, (UCLA Asian-American Studies Center, 1971). This is a very interesting and readable article treating films and TV shows in terms of their treatment and stereotyping of Chinese. If possible, the article can be assigned to a class (10th and 12th grade) before the preliminary discussion. Roots can also be obtained at Everybody's Bookstore.
4. Images of Asia: American Views of China and India by Harold R. Isaacs, (Harper Torchbooks, 1972). An in-depth study of American attitudes towards China which is useful as both background reading and source material for projects on the subject. \$4.25.
5. Foreign Devils by Pat Barr, (Penguin Books, 1972). An excellent and well-illustrated introduction to Asian Images of the West. \$2.95.

RENTAL OF "MISUNDERSTANDING CHINA"

The film may be rented from the following organizations:

1. CBS News Division
524 West 57th Street
New York, New York 10019

(212) 765-4321 Fee: \$50.00 plus airmail shipping
2. University of California Extension Media Center
2232 Shattuck Avenue
Berkeley, California 94720

(415) 642-0460 Fee: \$33.00

FOR GROUPS IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA ONLY:

3. Asian-American Studies Department
3407 Dwinelle Hall
University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

(415) 642-6555 Fee: \$15.00 plus postage
4. This film is also available from the Bay Area China Education Project (BAYCEP) for showing to large groups of students (more than 100) or to groups of teachers (such as social studies department meetings) in the San Francisco Bay Area only. There is no charge except postage and/or delivery. The film must usually be booked at least one month in advance. For further information Bay Area teachers should contact the BAYCEP office.

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